

# The Sentimental City: The Lost Urbanism of Pierre Mac Orlan and Guy Debord

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The little lane in front of the house is deserted. It's late afternoon, a few days into the New Year, and darkness is creeping in. Snow is still thick on the ground from yesterday's storm, a carpeting that left much of the Seine-et-Marne department glowing in luminescent white. I trample through the slush listening to the wind whistle through the trees, feeling its icy chill, and approach the entrance of a house that backs onto the willow-banked Petit Morin River. Everything is at once tranquil and eerie, fitting for the life and oeuvre of its former occupant, who resided within its ancient walls for over forty years, walls that seemed to drape around him like a familiar overcoat. The main entrance is only a footstep from the roadside and a stone plaque immortalizes 'Pierre Mac Orlan, 1882–1970', the writer who once joked that he was the only *Goncourt Academicien* who opened the door himself.

His was a life of adventures more clandestine than spectacular, and I marvel at the ordinariness of this brick abode that stands austere and silent. In his youth, Mac Orlan partook in strange wanderings, vowed to become a painter, and traveled far and wide: to Montmartre and Le Havre, to Brest and Rouen, to Marseilles and Metz, to Cologne and Berlin, to Naples and London, to Bruges and Copenhagen, to Morocco and Tunisia. In turn-of-the-century Paris, he befriended Picasso, Modigliani and Apollinaire, almost got himself killed in the Great War, and reported from the front as Hitler's darkness swept in. Meanwhile, he replaced the brush with the quill and penned scores of novels about pirates and outcasts, essays and memoirs that spanned both world wars, and poems about Bohemian bistros, sailors' bars and mysterious women of the night that became music serenaded on the accordion and sung by Juliette Gréco, Monique Morelli and Germaine Montero.

Mac Orlan basked under a *lumière froide*, a cold light, and was a veritable visitor at midnight, an urban voyager whose odyssey eventually transported him back to Ithaca, to his house at Saint-Cyr-sur-Morin, where other adventures would soon begin, those more sentimental, more intimate, more slightly foxed. Standing on the threshold of his quaint, deserted house in mid-winter, I knew my own sentimental adventure had already begun. It had started in earnest a few years back when I'd stood outside another old farmhouse, in another part of France, one surrounded by an imposing stone wall. This house wasn't so much serene beside the river as brooding under a volcano, in the Auvergne, in Champot, a tiny hamlet a few kilometers from the village of Bellevue-la-Montagne. It, too, was a property shrouded in mystery, like the former occupant himself, Guy Debord, who'd lived on-and-off there for twenty-odd years. With his wife Alice Becker-Ho he'd spent most summers and occasional winters at Champot. But in 1994, late in the afternoon on a drizzly 30th November, the guru of the Situationists had ended it all. The rumor then, since substantiated, was that he'd meticulously used a single bullet to shoot himself through the heart. He was dying anyway, of an alcohol-

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related illness, the incurable peripheral neuritis, which gradually burned away the body's nerve endings and brought on excruciating pain, pain apparently too much to endure.

I'd become obsessed with that Champot house and with Debord's ghost. So I started to chase it, in France and in books, in myself and in today's very troubled world. I'd been fascinated by how somebody infamous for a cult book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, for his part in the May 1968 insurrections, for drunken binges and late night wanderings in Paris during the 1950s, for street smarts and Marxist pretensions, could flee the city, could flee modern life itself, and live in isolation in a rural fortress behind a big wall. Through Debord I soon encountered Pierre Mac Orlan. In fact, it was Debord's widow, Alice, who'd urged me to engage more with Mac Orlan. He was one of Guy's favorite authors, she'd told me, as we sat *en plein air*, around a little table, inside the Debordian wall, a few summers back during *la canicule*, the heat wave that was then ravaging France. It's easy to imagine Debord at the same table, I remember thinking afterwards, savoring classic Mac Orlan lines like: 'There exist a certain number of cities of adventure . . . The name of these cities brings an evocative precision to the spirit of passive adventurers' (Mac Orlan, 1998: 42). 'One never should forget', Mac Orlan had said (*ibid.*: 37), 'that adventure is in the imagination of those who desire it. It is effaced when one believes they've found it, and when one holds it, it's not worth looking at'. 'Guy loved Mac Orlan's book the *Petit Manuel du Parfait Aventurier*', Alice said, matter-of-factly. 'He'd read it many times over, knew it well. He adored Pierre Mac Orlan'. 'Another of Guy's favorite Mac Orlan texts', she informed me, was *Villes*, a collection of essays on Paris, Brest, Rouen, Rome and London, published in 1929. Alice recommended I read it. I know of it, I'd said, recalling Debord's allusion to *Villes* in *Panegyrique*, (*cf.* Debord, 1989 : 68), and Alice's own use of it in her work on slang and the language of the dangerous classes (see Becker-Ho, 1990).

In *Panegyrique*, Debord's slim autobiography, a masterpiece of *sangfroid* belles-lettres, he is measured and surprisingly self-effacing. The tempo flows in marked contrast to the stirring critical refrains of *The Society of the Spectacle*, his militant call-to-arms against an emerging world order in which unity spelt division, essence appearance, truth falsity. The theoretical basis of the latter work remained, of course, vividly Marxian, blending Marx's youthful humanism with his mature political-economy, a left-wing Hegel with a materialist Feuerbach, a bellicose Machiavelli with a utopian Karl Korsch, a military Clausewitz with a romantic Georg Lukács. Twenty-two years on, though, in *Panegyrique*, Debord wrote quietly and reflectively about his 'grandiose' sojourns in Champot, about his 'pleasing and impressive solitude' (1989: 51), ruminating on a former life of intrigue, on past adventures, and, apparently, on Pierre Mac Orlan. But who, precisely, was Pierre Mac Orlan? And what part does he play in Debord's oeuvre? Does he hold the key to unlocking the Pandora's box of Debord's urbanism, his long lost urbanism, his urbanism of the future?

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*Petit Manuel du Parfait Aventurier* is an intriguing Mac Orlan text hailing from 1920. Within the space of 60-or-so tight leaves, Mac Orlan's whole life-spirit is laid bare. In it, he presents some compelling, if offbeat, notions about adventure: 'It's necessary to establish, as a law, that adventure doesn't exist' (Mac Orlan, 1998: 15). Adventure, he said, was more about *fantastique social*, and his novels, like his life, brim with just that. The *fantastique social* is a sensibility neither supernatural nor paranormal, but profoundly everyday, reserved for back streets and damaged people, for twilight nooks and crannies, for shadowy bars and taverns, often adjacent to water, frequently animated by liquor, and invariably dramatized by departure, departures never made. One glimpsed the urban fantastic for a thrilling instant, tapped its hidden recesses by tapping the idiosyncrasies of the imagination. 'To give an explanation to the fantastic',

Mac Orlan said (*ibid.*), 'is a difficult thing. All explanations of the fantastic are, besides, arbitrary. The fantastic, like adventure, only exists in the imagination of those who search for it. One reaches, by chance, the goal of adventure. Try as one does to penetrate its aura, the mysterious elements that populate it disappear' (*ibid.*). 'Like there exists an adventurer, active without imagination and often insensible, all the less endowed with a feeling that escapes us, there are creative people in the shadow of the fantastic who themselves participate a little in the impressions of some privileged onlooker' (*ibid.*: 24–5).

These privileged onlookers Mac Orlan christened 'passive adventurers', who stand in direct contrast to 'active adventurers'. Such latter types are men of action who ran off with the Foreign Legion, joined the colonial infantry, set sail with the navy, climbed mountains, went up in balloons. Active adventurers explore to forget, to seek fortune, to find distraction. They desperately 'need to conquer', Mac Orlan said (1998: 22). For the active adventurer, 'certain traits are essential: the total absence of imagination and of sensibility. He doesn't fear death because he can't explain it; but he fears those who are clearly stronger than him' (*ibid.*). However, without the passive adventurer the active adventurer would be nothing. Passive adventurers, on the other hand, are more fastidious, more cerebral explorers, more studious and solitary, reading a lot and dreaming often, taking to the pen rather than the high sea. Their voyages are commonplace, more carefully chosen, perhaps less risky: cities and cabarets, burlesque and books, wine and song, love and hate, intimacy and death. They never learnt to swim but probably play the accordion and know every sailor shanty. Passive adventuring is an art form, 'a question of intellectual gymnastics, understanding everyday exercises and practicing the methodology of the imagination' (*ibid.*: 28). 'If I had to raise a statue of Captain Kidd', Mac Orlan quipped in his *Petit Manuel* (*ibid.*: 57), 'I would put up at the foot of the monument the gentle and meditative figure of Robert Louis Stevenson, the immortal author of *Treasure Island*'.

The conflicting impulse of passive and active adventuring underwrites the whole of Mac Orlan's oeuvre, just as it underwrote his own life, his life on the road and his *pantouflard* St.-Cyr existence. It likewise underwrote Debord's career, a destiny punctuated by his Situationist activist years (1957–72) and his life 'in exile' in Champot. 'This domination of the past', Mac Orlan said in *Villes* (1929: 128), 'is intolerable. One dissipates its magic spell by giving it a congruent literary form'. *Villes* is a charming memoir that gives congruent literary form to Mac Orlan's vagabond years between 1899 and 1927. A typical mixture of rhetoric and reality, it evokes wandering and seaports, grubby back streets and shady, twilight characters, all of which hark back to another age, to a sentimental education seldom found on any latter-day curriculum. 'When I arrived in Rouen', Mac Orlan recalled (*ibid.*: 13), 'I'd hitherto been content to sleep in railway stations and, occasionally, in haystacks which were no less disagreeable than sleeping in the sheltered hollow of a trench or in a barn without a roof. Entering the rue des Charrettes, I was buoyed by optimism because, graced by my one-hundred and twenty francs every month, I hoped to conquer the city between midnight and three in the morning. These somnolent city lights drove me to mingle in its nocturnal secret life'. Mac Orlan's voice here resonates with a rich tonality of innocence; *Villes* is a writer's adventure story: turning its pages kindles the imagination like the chance turning of an unknown street corner.

Nocturnal street-corners wend and weft their way through *Villes*. As we leaf through its time-served pages, beat-up personalities and nettle-ridden paving stones invade our living rooms and possess our minds. Suddenly, somehow, we find ourselves foisted backwards to fin-de-siècle Montmartre, outside the Lapin Agile tavern, sauntering along the rue Saint-Vincent in summertime, or loitering in winter at the Place du Tertre, feeling its icy chill penetrate our threadbare overcoat and undernourished body. In Mac Orlan's Montmartre, 'dancehalls and the specious appearance of an ancient little village distil into a subtle poison of laziness and insomnia' (1929: 64). Here, in Montmartre, 'the most commonly known physical and cerebral malaise flaunts itself in carpet-slippers', while 'women, pimps, knives and alcohol rendezvous under an arbor

decorated in honeysuckle' (*ibid.*: 64). 'These Montmartre days and nights', he said (*ibid.*: 108), 'piled up and blended together like tarnished trinkets in an old junk shop. Days frittered away like lamps that shone no more; nights wore out like gloomy velvet curtains; twilights faded. But all that crammed happily into my memory and would later serve me. It's in earning a living that I acquired the consoling power to write a few books'.

*Villes* also invites us to smell the sea at Brest and to stroll down rue de Siam, 'a river whose waters are richly populated and whose catch is always fruitful' (Mac Orlan, 1929: 145). In Brest, under a sky of prehistoric gray, we can hear foghorns and the clatter of clogs, and can push open the shutters of bars that want to surrender themselves to the sea. 'One doesn't come to Brest', wrote Mac Orlan (*ibid.*: 133), 'to enjoy life, to flaunt an elegant dress, or to recuperate in the sun; other reasons, those the sea doesn't ignore, lead men and women towards this city without liners or departures. For it's here where adventure wafts like a bellowing salty breeze'. Pungent adventures likewise waft across the Channel in *Villes*, to London's Commercial Road, where, with Mac Orlan, we can reenact scenes from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and where, 'at midnight, a cold and luminous sadness seizes you by the shoulders or touches you high on the arms like a police baton' (*ibid.*: 176). 'In this long and naked street, permeated with a vague odor of opium and gin, under dazzling and sterile lamplight, there is', he said (*ibid.*: 176–7), 'just me and my shadow'. In *Villes*, we wander melancholically a step behind Mac Orlan's shadowy presence, a journey an ageing Guy Debord made many times. Or, we can pursue him to Strasbourg, or to Cologne, or to Mainz, sit beside him on a café terrace overlooking the Rhine and sip a warming vintage red. 'In a little Baccharach tavern, placed under the sign of Bacchus and Jehovah, I drank some Rudesheimer red, which resembled our wines of the Rhône. There are certain sharp and harsh Rhine wines that smell of frogs; the red Rudesheimer was living like fire. We held out our frozen hands in front of a glass whose crimson flame kindled a thousand eloquent embers' (*ibid.*: 212).

*Villes* is a veritable field-guide to Mac Orlan's enchanting urban labyrinth, a cascading array of back-alleys and mangled memories, of wounded warriors and warped waysides. The narrative drift seems factual but the driving force is Mac Orlan's own *noblesse de phrase*. He shows us how to write about the city of dream, the sentimental city, a city that all true urbanists hold in their hearts, come what may. 'Misery in Naples, in London, in Hamburg, in Berlin, in Paris, in Barcelona, in Anvers', he said (1929: 176), 'reveals itself through intimate details profoundly imprinted on memory. It's relatively easy to be stirred and to write about a city after having touched the picturesque of its neighborhoods. Tragedy often mingles with the familiar odors of the street. Misery plunges everybody and everything into an infinitely mysterious mist that permits the imagination to create literary characters more living than the living themselves'.

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Mac Orlan and Debord's vagabond peregrinations around Paris are fifty years apart; yet they both follow a well-trodden path staked out long ago by François Villon, the medieval poet and *mauvais garçon*, the bad boy who kept bad company. Villon wrote intensely personal and lyrical poetry, like his masterpiece *The Testament* (1462), as well as some wonderfully ribald verses in slang that Mac Orlan and Debord fondly cite in their books. He often utilized the argot of the 'Coquillards', an organized criminal underworld with their own secret language, a tongue no outsider could decipher. The canonical French poet had loose Coquillard connections; his friend, Régnier de Montigny, petty hood, cop beater and kleptomaniac, a prototypical Jean Genet character, was a Coquillard, as was Colin de Cayeux, one of Villon's companions in the notorious College of Navarre robbery, when one Christmas night they climbed over a

high wall, picked the lock of a safe, and made off with the school's coffers. 'Keep changing outfits', Villon preached in 'poem in slang' (1960: 173), 'and ducking into churches;/ take off, make sure your/ clothes don't trip you up./ To show the others/ they strung up Montigny;/ he babbled to the crowd a while,/ and then the hangman snapped his neck . . . Prince of jerks who stick around,/ hit the open road, move on,/ and always keep your eyes peeled/ for the hangman's filthy paws'.

'The Montmartre of my twenties', wrote Mac Orlan in another touching memoir *Montmartre* (1969: 21), whose chapters are named after the neighborhood's streets, 'was clearly inspired by France's finest popular poet. His silhouette wandered along the walls of the rue des Saules and in front of the mass grave of Saint Vincent, disturbed by the heckles of the young Mademoiselles sat at the *Lapin Agile's* grand table . . . His shadow wandered in the twilight between the trees of the Place du Tertre, near the old kiosk, now long gone, where police bobbies stood watch by night'. Villon's spirit is there with young Mac Orlan's underground of wannabe painters and poets, deadbeats and geniuses who haunted lower and upper Montmartre yearning for a little bread, some love, and a warm bed. Adventures here were full of risky business and barroom brawls where nobody really gets hurt and where protagonists have nothing to fear but themselves. 'Villon played with loaded dice', said Mac Orlan (*ibid.*: 85), 'in the company of Régnier de Montigny. We had all known in our life a Régnier de Montigny for dealing the cards. But the coquillards of the rue Cortot or the rue des Saules knew how to hang themselves on the gallows of fortune without the intervention of the executioner'.

'We had several points of resemblance', Debord likewise claimed (1989: 26), 'with those other devotees of the dangerous life who had spent their time, exactly five hundred years before us, in the same city and on the same side of the river . . . there had been that noble man among my friends who was the complete equal of Régnier de Montigny, as well as many other rebels destined for bad ends; and there were the pleasures and splendor of those lost young hoodlum girls who kept us such good company in our dives and could not have been that different from the girls the others had known under the names of Marion l'Idole or Catherine, Biérix and Bellet'. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Debord and his band of coquillards — 'demolition experts', as he likened them (*ibid.*: 16) — inhabited their own little patch, their own 'zone of perdition' (*ibid.*: 23) where, he said, 'his youth went as if to achieve its education' and where adventures always seemed closer to home, imaginative leaps of the mind and spirit, intellectual and political rather than necessarily geographical, taking to the pen and bottle as much as to the high sea. Indeed, he admitted (*ibid.*: 43), 'I haven't had the need to travel very far . . . Most of the time I lived in Paris, exactly in the triangle defined by the intersections of the rue Saint-Jacques and the rue Royer-Colland, rue Saint Martin and rue Greneta, and the rue du Bac and rue de Commailles'. It was a smallish area, accessible on foot, spanning both sides of the Seine, between Les Halles and the Pantheon, in the 3rd and 5th *arrondissements*. He had, Debord said, spent his days and nights in this zone, and never would have left if the life he'd led there hadn't been completely destroyed.

This was a milieu of 'dangerous classes' (Debord, 1989: 16), of malcontents and the poor, who engaged in perilous pursuits and who knew how to live off the land — the urban land. They were lost prophets of an almost bygone age now, an age of innocence and naïveté, of espresso and wine and Gauloises and mad, raving ideals. They wandered in the night and were consumed by fire. Everybody around Debord then was young and fanatical, talked about philosophy, art, film, politics, and drank a lot, usually in cheap cafés and bars, sometimes with poor students in the Latin Quarter, other times with the lumpenproletariat of the Marais. This was the light that shone so intensely for Debord, radiant against a backdrop of Art Blakey's 'Whisper Not'. An infamous Debordian hole-in-the-wall where he and others hung out and drank, was Chez Moineau's on the rue du Four. Close to the fashionable existentialist world of 'Café de Flore' and 'Les Deux Magots', it was a universe away in terms of clientele. Under Debord's poor cloak was an already legendary drinker. He was a regular at Chez Moineau's, whose mainstay

wasn't bourgeois highbrow types, like Sartre and de Beauvoir, but hoods and gangsters, prostitutes and pimps, dropouts and runaways, petty criminals and time-served boozers, latter-day accomplices of François Villon, misfit characters from the pages of Céline, Mac Orlan and Genet. There, Debord got drunk only once but it lasted a lifetime. This *demi-monde* was his perpetual source of play and adventure. 'Paris then', he said, 'was never asleep in its entirety, and permitted you to debauch and to change neighborhoods three times each night. Its inhabitants hadn't yet been driven away and dispersed' (Debord, 1994: 223). In Paris,

there remained a people who had ten times barricaded its streets and routed its kings. It was a people who didn't give themselves to images . . . The houses were not deserted in the center, nor resold to spectators . . . The modern commodity still hadn't come to show us what it could do to a street. Nobody, because of urban planners, was obliged to go to sleep far away. You still hadn't seen, by the fault of government, the sky darken and the good times disappear, and the false fog of pollution permanently covering the circulation of things in the valley of desolation (*ibid.*: 223–5).

The city still had time for 'unmanageable riff-raff', for 'the salt of the earth', for 'people quite sincerely ready to set the world on fire so that it had more brilliance' (Debord, 1994: 230). In fact, the city was so beautiful that many people preferred to be poor there, rather than rich somewhere else; they preferred, like Debord, to lead an 'openly independent life', finding themselves at home in 'the most ill-famed company' (*ibid.*: 230). At Moineau's, alcohol flowed in 'a perpetual stream', and everybody was at it. Sometimes they drank the place dry. Most boozers were flat broke, or near it; and *la patronne*, Madame Moineau, wasn't much better off. By all accounts, she was a Bretonne and used to wear an old blue apron, looking more like a cleaning lady than a café owner. She was there every day and night, cooked and scrubbed floors, and loved everybody like a grandmother. In the late 1950s, chez Moineau was a little sanctuary of free play, a home away from home, where young people supped, sang, played chess, talked books, fell in love, fell out of love.

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The bulldozers and the wrecker's ball never made it to the Latin Quarter, not since Haussmann's day anyway; but tourist cafés, wine bars and restaurants, as well as the antique stores and chic boutiques, have just as effectively seen off the neighborhood. Montparnasse Tower, Paris's first skyscraper, gave it the added finger. Unsurprisingly, Moineau's is a distant memory. Dodging traffic across the Boulevard Saint-Germain, and journeying on to rue du Four, offers little novelty for the present-day wanderer, for any intrepid urbanist intent on serendipity. This is where Debord found and lost his youth, where 'we no more than other men could stay sober on this watch'. But it's a watch that has now undergone solid *embourgeoisement*. Nobody would suspect number 22's past life either, that tiny bar whose clientele dreamt about changing the world, of setting it ablaze only to give it more light and warmth. These days, chez Moineau's takes on a perverse New Age twist, a store selling all sorts of scented wares, herbs and prophylactics for yuppies and preppies who don't know what to spend their surplus cash on.

Everywhere around rue du Four and rue de Buci is beautiful: the buildings are beautiful, the people are beautiful, the streets are clean and nice, and central Paris looks just as amazingly alluring. But the *romance* has long gone: the place no longer lives, no longer breathes, palpitates, no longer has intrigue or mystery. The landscape is flat, empty, predictable: the future is closed, sealed by market forces; the center is now a spectacular showcase, a polished ornament: *reel* life has vanquished *real* life. 'Between the rue du Four and the rue de Buci', wrote Debord in *Panégryque* (1989: 28), 'where our youth so completely went astray as a few glasses were drunk, one could feel certain

that we would never do any better'. But he could do better than what we have here: 'There is no greater folly than the present organization of life' (Debord, 1994: .252). Those 'bards of conditioning', Debord knew, had ASSASSINATED Paris, making a killing in the process. The city had died in his arms, in her prime, from a 'fatal illness', a fatal illness 'carrying off all the major cities, and this illness is itself only one of the numerous symptoms of the material decadence of a society. But Paris had more to lose than any other. It was great good fortune to have been young in this town when, for the last time, it shone with so intense a fire' (*ibid.*: 226–7).

Debord adored Paris: it was his stomping ground, his laboratory. He bore the burden of its travails, taking them very personally, very politically. He was what Antonio Gramsci (1971) would have labeled an 'organic intellectual': he belonged to a place and to a people, and he felt their 'elemental passions'. And yet, more and more, this belonging and Debord's kind were being threatened, were being displaced, torn down and torn apart, as neighborhoods began to get readjusted and reordered. Henri Lefebvre remembered his friendship with Debord lasting from about 1957 to 1962. The sociology professor was teaching Marxism at Strasbourg, and he'd met and taught other younger Situationists there in 1958. Lefebvre, who lived in Paris near to Debord and Michèle Bernstein, remembered them inhabiting 'a kind of studio on rue Saint Martin, in a dark room, no lights at all'. It was 'a miserable place, but at the same time a place where there was a great deal of strength and radiance in the thinking and the research' (Lefebvre, 1997: 80). Nobody knew how Debord got by. He had no job, didn't want a job, opting instead to reside in a rich and happy poverty, a privilege long gone for most city dwellers, certainly for most Parisians.

Parisian rents were bearable back then; cheap thrills were still to be had, cold-water affordability was possible. Debord lived only a stone's throw away from Les Halles, from the old fruit and vegetable market halls, destined to be demolished in 1971 to make way for the rapid commuter train. (The Pompidou Center, completed six years later, would seal the neighborhood's fate.) Before that, Les Halles had been a sprawling, delirious, humdrum world, intensely alive, bawdy and beautiful, an urban paradise for Debord. When Baudelaire wrote in *Le Voyage*, 'To plunge into the abyss . . . And find in depths of the unknown the new', it might have been old Les Halles he was describing. But by the mid-1970s that world was nigh gone, assassinated in the name of economic progress and sound planning, done with the blessing of career politicians. 'The assassination of Paris' became the pithy thesis of Louis Chevalier's damning 1977 autopsy on Gallic uricide, which denounced those 'polytechnicians' — elite bureaucrats educated at France's *grandes écoles* — who'd systematically orchestrated the deadly *coup de grâce*. Chevalier took his native city to heart, agonized over its woes, and Debord acknowledged a strange affinity. 'It could almost be believed, despite the innumerable earlier testimonies of history and the arts, that I was the only person to have loved Paris; because, first of all, I saw no one else react to this question in the repugnant seventies. But subsequently I learned that Louis Chevalier, its old historian, had published then, without too much being said about it, *The Assassination of Paris*. So we could count at least two righteous people in the city at that time' (Debord, 1989: 46).

Debord hated Le Corbusier and all he stood for. In 1925, the tyrant Swiss-cum-Parisian planner had proposed his '*Voisin Plan*', a vision for a modern Paris that would update Haussmann's boulevards, replacing them with a gigantic expressway grid pattern, achieving in central Paris what Robert Moses hadn't achieved in downtown Manhattan. Sixteen enormous skyscrapers would likewise sprout up along the banks of the Seine, converting Paris into a thoroughly modernized radiant city, a real life Alphaville. The plan, of course, was a non-starter; yet the mentality persisted. The highways came, like the Right-Bank expressway in 1976, baptized the 'Georges-Pompidou Expressway', after the Republic's President, gouging out the old quays of the Seine. And the towers went up, like Montparnasse, and at the westerly business node, La Défense, where Cartesian glass and steel gave public space the kiss of death. Close by, meanwhile, the 'new' city of Nanterre, 'whose boredom, hideousness, rawness,

whose reinforced concrete', Chevalier had noted in *The Assassination of Paris*, 'condemned students to a kind of captivity and summed up all they detest'. 'The young now spit on Paris', Chevalier lamented (1994: 12), 'Paris that had for centuries been their paradise, the city to which they flocked, convinced they would find there all they dreamed of — pleasure, love, success, glory'. Paris had been victim of a '*Grande Bouffe*', a greedy feast of rape and pillage, undertaken by technocrats in cahoots with a new breed of business executives, more brazenly entrepreneurial than their forebears, frequently schooled in America. Paris once stood for 'people from all walks of life and all classes, people of all sorts, from high society, from the middling sort, from no society at all' (*ibid.*: 246). Now the new consumerist Paris, the Paris of the spectacle, 'is a closed universe, disinfected, deodorized, devoid of the unexpected, without surprises, with nothing shocking, a well-protected universe' (*ibid.*: 84).

Like Debord, Chevalier saw the destruction of Les Halles' old market halls as *the* violation of Paris, its real sacking, its real assassination. 'With Les Halles gone', Chevalier despaired (1994: 247), 'Paris has gone'. February 27th 1969 proved Les Halles' last waltz, its long-dreaded last night, when Parisians must have felt the same pain that New Yorkers felt when old Penn Station was torn down three years earlier. Soon everybody was ousted, a crater hacked out, and the 'hateful' Centre Pompidou crushed everything under a mountain of dust and sadness. Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers's national center of arts and culture, with its 'frightful jumble of pipes and conduits and ducts', dubbed 'the gas works', filled the hole but only added to the void. 'It is blue', Chevalier quipped (*ibid.*: 245), 'yet Paris is gray'. Nearby, a subterranean cave called 'The Forum', 'a deep, fetid underground', concentrating all that Paris had to show off as high-class merchandise, rubbed salt into the wounds. If the Sacré-Coeur trampled over the legacy of the Communards, Pompidou did likewise over *les soixante-huitards*. Debord, needless to say, abhorred the Centre Pompidou, too. In a twist of fate, the complex held a big Situationist retrospective in 1989, inviting Debord to a private viewing. He refused, unsurprisingly.

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Debord cherished Paris musty and worn, caked in dust, like a well-thumbed rare book collection that still found faithful readers. He was fascinated by the past, by the tradition of the dead generations, those weighing like a nightmare on the brain of the living. But he was also an experimental thinker and political progressive, once confessing in *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, his haunting film, a desire to 'rebuild everything'. Released a year after Louis Chevalier's monograph, *In Girum*'s monotone voiceover uttered: 'It is no longer an issue between conservation and change. We were ourselves, more than anybody, the people of change, in a changing time. The owners of society were obliged, in order to sustain themselves, to change what was the inverse of ours' (Debord, 1994: 278–9).

The Situationists were men and women of change. They were the ones who wanted to rebuild everything; but they also loved the past. They somehow wanted to go back to the future, wanted to reconstruct the best of the old world in the worst of the new, in its ruins. Debord was a man of the future yet he wanted to reconnect with the past. He wanted to bring into our modern age the epic features of former ages, and propel them into a world yet to be, a world still awaited. The incessant, eternally reoccurring, trajectory of life is precisely reflected in the motif and the film's Latin pallindromic title: 'we go round and round in the night . . .' Time flows through *In Girum* like a river always moving, in which you cannot step into twice; every ending has a new beginning, an '*à suivre*', everything begins again in a new guise. 'All has gone forever', Debord said (1994: 280), citing poet Li Po, 'everything slips away at once, events and men — like the relentless flow of the Yang-tse, which loses itself in the sea'. Paris is gone forever; there is no stepping back, no second act, it's a different Seine now. The city had

become an ‘ungovernable wasteland ... where new sufferings disguise themselves under the name of ancient pleasures; and where people are so afraid. They go round and round in the night and are consumed by fire. They wake up alarmed, and groping, search for life. Rumor has it that those who were expropriating it have, to top it all, mislaid it. So here is a civilization that is on fire, completely capsizing and sinking’ (*ibid.*).

*In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* was Debord’s epic voyage brought to the screen. It was his very own *Iliad*, his *Divine Comedy*, coursing through mythical seas and plummeting into hellish realistic depths. It is a film about film — or, more accurately, about anti-film. It’s also a Situationist poem on the art of war, a document about the passage of time, a metaphysical exploration of Debord’s mind, to say nothing of his threnody on Paris. It is Debord’s most autobiographical and metaphysical venture. We glimpse him at various ages, at nineteen, at twenty-five, and at forty-five. There are aerial views of Paris, panned panoramas of nocturnal Les Halles, café entrances and interiors, cellars and caves, pirates and Robin Hood, scenes of cannon fire from battleships, cavalry charges, troop formations, battlefields, Custer’s last stand, the charge of the Light Brigade, all interspersed with snippets from Clausewitz and Sun Tze. The tone throughout is sad and forlorn, like a romantic refrain, like Chateaubriand’s René, like a magnificent and terrible peace, the true taste of the passage of time. The lyrics are poetic, sublime: ‘Midway through the path of real life, we were surrounded by a somber melancholy, expressed in so much sad and mocking lines, in the café of lost youth’ (Debord, 1994: 240).

It was there where ‘we lived as forlorn children, our adventures incomplete’ (Debord, 1994: 248). Who else, he asked, could understand the beauty of Paris apart from those who can remember its glory? Who else could know the hardships and the pleasures we knew in these places where everything has become so dire? Once, the trees weren’t suffocated, the stars not extinguished by the progress of alienation. Liars have always been in power, Debord knew; but now economic development had given rulers the means to lie about everything. How could he not remember the charming hooligans and proud girls with whom he inhabited these dingy dives? ‘Although despising all ideological illusions, and quite indifferent to what would later prove them right, these reprobates had not disdained to declare openly what was to follow. To finish off art, to announce in the midst of a cathedral that God was dead, to undertake to blow up the Eiffel Tower, such were little scandals indulged in sporadically by those whose way of life was permanently such a large scandal. They pondered on why some revolutions failed; and asked if the proletariat really exists, and, if this was the case, what it could be’ (*ibid.*: 238).

‘As for myself’, Debord mused (1994: 247), ‘I have never regretted anything I have done, and I admit that I am completely unable to imagine what else I could have done, being what I am’. Our formula for overthrowing the world, he said, wasn’t found in books: we found it in wandering, wandering in the night. It lasted for days; nothing was like the previous day, and it never ended. It was a quest for an unholy Grail, with astonishing encounters, remarkable obstacles, grandiose betrayals, and perilous enchantments. ‘We hadn’t aspired to subsidies for scientific research, nor to the praise of newspaper intellectuals. We carried fuel to where the fire was. It was in this matter that we definitely enlisted the Devil’s party, that is to say, in this historical evil that leads the existing conditions to their destruction; through the bad side that makes history by ruining all established satisfaction’ (*ibid.*: 253).

They had met ‘to enter into a conspiracy of limitless demands’, finding themselves ‘enraptured with a beauty that would be swept away and which would not return’ (Debord, 1994: 259). ‘We will soon need to leave this city that was for us so free, but which is going to fall entirely into the hands of our enemies. Already, without recourse, they’re applying their blind law, remaking everything in their likeness, that is to say, on the model of a sort of cemetery’ (*ibid.*: 259). Society has always rewarded mediocrity, always rewarded those who kowtow to its unfortunate laws. ‘Yet I am, precisely at this time, the only person to have had some renown, clandestine and bad, and whom they

haven't succeeded to get to appear on this stage of renunciation . . . I am long practiced at living an obscure and elusive existence' (*ibid.*). It is a *métier* in which nobody can ever get a doctorate; so spoke our doctor of nothing, our 'Prince of Division'. And so the sensation of time slipped by, and the epoch that Debord loved, along with its thrills and innocence, melted away forever.

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There is a telling moment in Pierre Mac Orlan's novel *La Vénus Internationale* (1923: 236–7) in which Mathieu Raynold, a jaded publisher, remarks to his old friend Nicolas Gohelle: 'A man lives two existences. Until the age of 45 he absorbs the elements surrounding him. Then, all of a sudden, it's over; he doesn't absorb anything more. Thereafter he lives the duplicate of his first existence, and tries to tally the succeeding days with the rhythms and odors of his earlier active life'. Debord himself was trying to negotiate these two existences in *In Girum Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, a project he'd completed a little after his 45th birthday. Without maybe knowing it then, he was already tallying his retreat behind the high fortress wall in Champot with the rhythms and odors of 1950s' Paris. In those Champot years, Debord wrote tenderly, thought complexly, perhaps even more complexly than ever before, not just about destruction but about things 'he'd loved' (1989: 16), about dear friends and comrades, about carousing till dawn. In the past, he'd been an 'active adventurer', a maverick voyager, somebody who'd actively sought out novelty and change. Later, the 'extreme nihilism' of his old Situationist entourage became a cherished memory, a moody melancholy; to Champot he retreated, a prince in exile, a sailor home from the sea. Thereafter, he developed into a supreme Mac Orlanian 'passive adventurer', lurking with intent, within yellowing leaves, cut off from anything real or active, in a heady nether-nether continent of the unconscious, warm and safe. There, he could re-imagine and recreate his Paris as dream, as a lost twilight world of yesterday.

That's why, in the end, Debord adored Mac Orlan: Mac Orlan, after all, let Debord glimpse himself in his own living room, at Champot, at the rue du Bac apartment Debord sometimes frequented in the early 1990s, where he could journey to distant shores, go to far-off urban spaces, make daring visitations, get drunk and dance, and still feel at home. And he could take you there with him. That's also why Debord's politics and urbanism will never die, why his books and films will never date — and that's why there'll always be people like me who'll want to seek him out. Debord's ideas will live on, not so much as realpolitik as an urbanism of the imagination. His life was an active voyage of discovery — engaging in covert activities here, disturbing the peace there; and yet, for all that, Debord's enduring legacy is perhaps how he tapped the mysteries of the urban unconscious, unearthed the sentimental city, opening up its everyday heights and illuminating its nocturnal depths. Mac Orlan helped Debord retrace his steps through ruins and recapture an everyday sentimentality of an epoch of streets and hoodlums and cheap thrills. It's a realm richer and deeper than the rarified universe frequently evoked in academic studies. It's also the enduring legacy bequeathed by Guy Debord and the Situationists. For, alongside Mac Orlan, Debord understood not so much the promise of the future as the power of the past, a phantasmal zone that's almost gone but needs defending. 'It isn't', said Mac Orlan near the end of *Montmartre* (1969: 126), 'for regretting the past that one needs to meditate on this detail, but for regretting the future'.

'Where are the kids of the street', Mac Orlan laments in '*A Sainte-Savine*' (1969: 305–6), one of his popular songs for the accordion, penny poems put to music that Debord knew so well and played often on his old gramophone, 'those little hoodlums of Paris/ Their adolescence busted/ By the prejudices of midnight?/ Where are the gals of Sainte-Savine/ Singing in dancehalls aglow?' It's a good question. For the sake of an urbanism of the future, I hope those kids of the street, those little hoodlums, are still in

our midst, dreaming in some somnolent city, mingling in its nocturnal secret life, keeping those dancehalls aglow.

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